

Focus

Retirement turns a hobby into booming business

COLBORNE - When Norman and Cathy O'Neill launched themselves into official "retirement" back in 1989, it took all of three weeks for them to recognize they were about "to go bananas" if they didn't find an outlet for the energy and intellects *toute suite*.

Now, 10 years later, Norm's "wood hobby" is a thriving Colborne business. Specialty Lumber, the sawing, milling and retailing outlet on Division Street South, has them working six days a week and expanding the business to include daughter Trisha and son Shane as employees.

"We went south for three weeks," Cathy recalls of the year Norm retired as a high-school math teacher. "Norm golfed and I took a china doll course. We were so bored down there. There was very little to do if you didn't golf."

"It wasn't for us," Norm smiles.

As a young university student, Norm worked summer's at a sash and planing mill at West Lorne in western Ontario.

"I was their errand boy," he recalls. "I worked there every summer I went to university."

In 1956, he and Cathy arrived in Colborne where he began teaching math at the Colborne High School until 1962. When the Colborne High School closed, he taught in Brighton 1962 until 1967 and then at Cobourg Collegiate Institute East from 1967 until his retirement in 1989.

His love of wood remained as a hobby interest throughout his teaching career.

"There used to be a lumber yard in Colborne. I worked for Joe Black in the summertime when I wasn't teaching," says Norm. The carriage house on their Division Street home property was always a hive of woodworking projects, tools and lumber.

By 1990, Cathy and Norm decided to open a lumber operation as a business. Quickly outgrowing the carriage house, they leased part of the entire building and surrounding they now occupy.

"I had what is now the shop area and the crafter's corner," Norm recalls. "Everything was in here, including the lumber."

They started out dealing with only two kinds of wood, oak and pine. Today, they have 21 different woods in stock, arrayed in labeled shelves, stacked

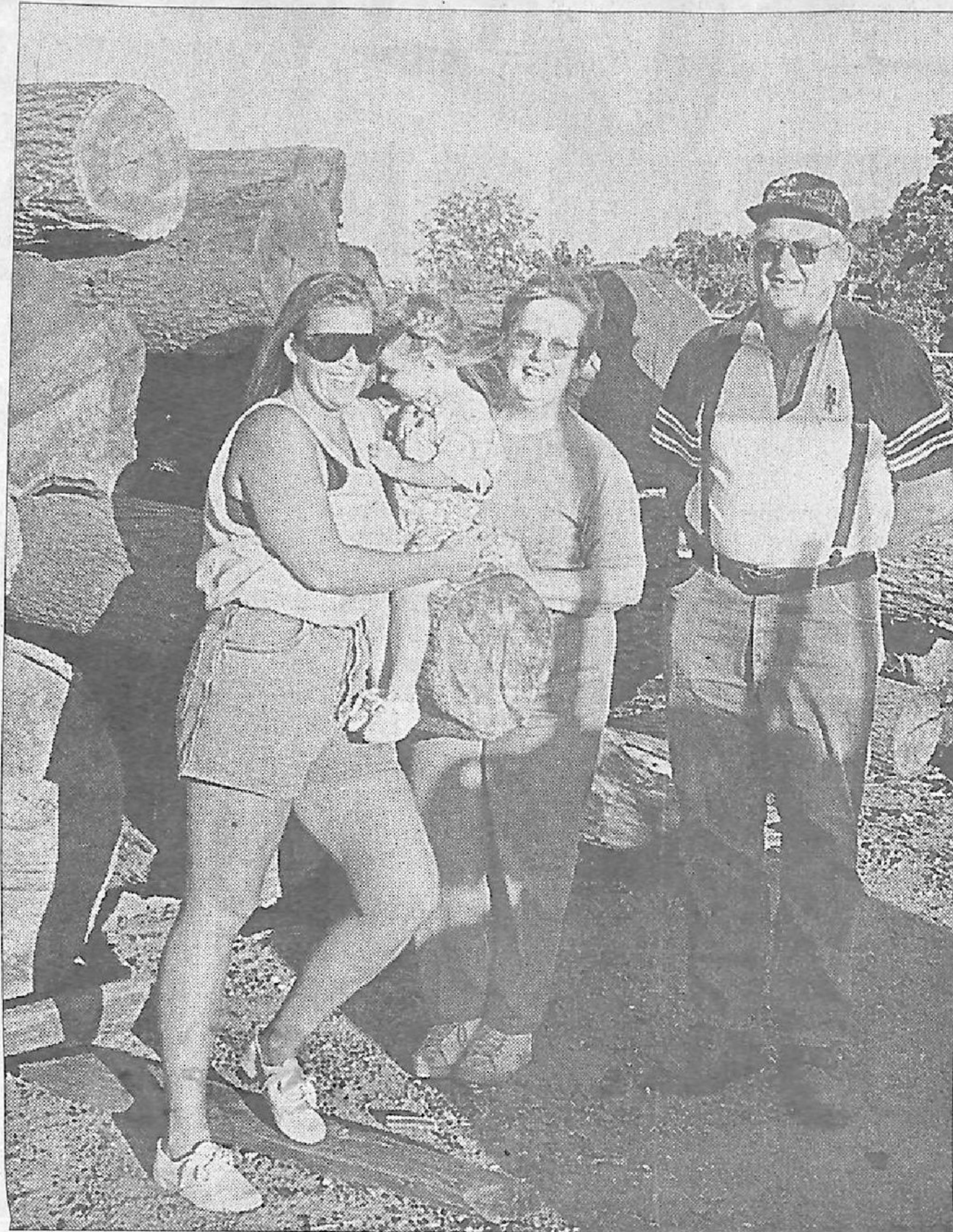
or other items, glue them right up to the point where people have the tools to take on the project themselves."

Cathy and Norm have worked hard to build their clientele base and rapport. In the beginning, they were catering to more heavily to 'crafters'. Cathy is adept at scroll saw work and, in fact, prefers that and almost anything going on at the lumber operation to the silent isolation of the computer book-keeping.

Daughter Trisha Davey joined the operation full time two years ago, learning the intricacies the band saw to maximize the potential of the wood in the raw logs. She's a member of the Roseneath Wood Carvers, enjoys building furniture (on her lunch hour), and capably stacks, sorts and handles the lumber stacking, kiln-drying and sales calculation.

One month ago, son Shane joined the firm for several days a week, incorporating the love of wood with his own Macmillan Construction business. He, too, handles custom sawing, woodworking, and home renovations including cabinets.

The diversity of interests each family member brings to business has been a



acter" pieces" that are used for everything from coffee tables, to signs and carving pieces.

In the crafter's corner beyond the main retail space there are blocks, boards and "character pieces" of 21 different woods that thrill the wood-carvers, wood burning and painting enthusiasts.

"We even have lilac, sumac and plum wood," says Norm, additions to the cherry, basswood, pine, oak and so on.

"Some of the old loggers come in here and it's pretty funny," chuckles Norm.

"They shake their heads and say, 'You keep that? You sell sumac? I've thrown that stuff away for years!'"

The natural colours of the wood lend to *in tarsia* woodworking, the creation of wooden inlay scenes using only the natural colours of wood.

There are days when everyone is exhausted, but both Norm and Cathy agree it's all worth it.

"We're active. I really enjoy the people, our customers," says Cathy.

"And you're always learning something new," the "retired" math teacher concludes.

Above: At the end of another busy day at Specialty Lumber, left to right, Trisha Davey and daughter Lacey, 2, Cathy and Norm O'Neill stand before a new shipment of logs for processing.

Left: Shane O'Neill carefully calculates getting the best cuts of wood from the bandsaw operation.

Below: Norm uses the moisture meter to test the moisture content of a board. Bins for 21 different types of wood are behind him.

Bottom right: The workshop area of the Specialty Lumber operation once contained the business that has expanded to include the entire building and yard of the old industrial plant in Colborne.

Bottom left: The Crafter's Corner offers assorted blocks and cuts of woods for use by carvers, woodburners and painters.



Story and photos by Mandy Martin

bonus for customers who come from as far away as Maryland in search of spe-